
4. Identity and L2 Pronunciation: Towards An Integrated Practice in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Personal identities are made up of both culture of origin and basics such as gender or race and social interaction. Through social interaction, personal identities are subject to constant change and depend not only on the person's culture of origin but also on the society or culture in which an individual must communicate. Applied to teaching pronunciation, this could be expressed by "the identity of a speaker depends as much on the voice of the speaker as on the ears of the listener." An ESL classroom is an excellent place for foreign students to explore their personal identities and confront themselves with the dominant culture in a protected environment as the concrete example at the end of this article illustrates.

Introduction

This article expands upon my plenary session at the 2002 TESOL France colloquium. The main purpose of my presentation was to broaden teachers' understanding of the complex ways in which identity and second language (L2) pronunciation are interrelated in English Language Teaching (ELT). Towards this goal, the second section of this article contrasts two perspectives that suggest different foci and pedagogical strategies for language classrooms. The first, consistent with research in *variationist* or *interactional sociolinguistics* (Chambers; Gumperz), provides an *indexical* focus; that is, it foregrounds language as an expression of who we are in terms of relatively stable and homogeneous social categories such as gender or race. The second, consistent with research from a *poststructural* framework (Morgan, *Poststructuralism and Applied Linguistics*; Norton; Pavlenko; Pennycook) emphasizes a *productive* focus, viewing identity as not only the source but also the *effect* of meaning-making activities. L2 pronunciation, in this frame, is seen as a resource through which individual and collective identities are continuously negotiated. Identity, by extension, is conceived through poststructuralism as dynamic, complex, and always implicated in relations of power.

The classroom implications of poststructural concepts, in particular, are elaborated in the context of four guidelines:

- a) intelligibility,
- b) negotiability of meaning,
- c) balancing a focus on form with focus on meaning,
- d) meaningful content and contexts.

These guidelines are then illustrated through a description of an L2 pronunciation activity, which took place in an adult ESL program for Chinese immigrants in Toronto, Canada.

Given the theme of the colloquium, a cross-cultural approach to the teaching and learning of English, the first section of this article briefly sets out my understanding of identity and how I relate it to the concept of culture.

Identity or culture: insights and blind spots

When I use the term identity, it refers to experiences and expressions of race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, spirituality or nation, as examples. I see identity as both who we think we are and what others view us to be. In this sense, I think of identity as primarily a relational, socially determined practice. Sometimes we emphasize parts of ourselves that conform to others' expectations; and other times we highlight parts of ourselves that emphasize differences or maintain continuity. Of course, sometimes we are conscious of this process, and other times we are not.

I do not see identity as replacing the concept of culture. Rather, I see identity as placing culture in a different framework, a critical framework that sees all theories of human experience as having both insights and blind spots. One of the most important insights is a key theme of the 2002 colloquium: the need to expand our understanding of culture in ELT. More than ever before, people of diverse ethnic, racial, national and linguistic backgrounds are required to live and work together and to communicate with each other. Cultural knowledge is clearly relevant in our work as language educators. We should know about cross-cultural differences and values with respect to literacy practices, discourse norms, interactional styles, and classificatory systems. This type of knowledge is foundational in terms of

facilitating intercultural understanding. But it is also essential in terms of fairness and social justice when we evaluate the competencies of people from different backgrounds (Corson).

At the same time, I want to suggest that we remain vigilant in questioning our assumptions regarding culture and identity. Though the importance of culture is generally acknowledged in ELT—witness the theme of the colloquium, for instance—it is a concept that is often unspecified in curriculum documents, resulting in teachers having “to formulate their own personal concept of culture” (Byram and Risager 83). In formulating such concepts, teachers draw upon a complex set of values and understandings: family and community experiences, national ideologies (e.g. homogeneity and monolingualism versus multicultural and multilingual doctrines), or the cultural content acquired through a particular language teacher education program (Ramanathan). Unexamined, teachers’ commonsensical responses to diversity and difference can be highly problematic, especially when they are transposed into settings where their commonality is no longer assured.

The cautionary stance I raise here comes after many years of ESL teaching and teacher education in Toronto, a place that is arguably the most multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual city in the world. Living in Toronto, and living in Canada—where multiculturalism is official policy—second language teachers are prone to certain tendencies or *blind spots*, some of which have broader implications beyond the Canadian context. Let me now mention three, in particular.

The first blind spot can be called the “simplification of culture,” a term borrowed from Neil Bissoondath’s powerful critique of official multiculturalism in Canada. Bissoondath claims that Canadian multiculturalism oppresses the very people it is supposed to serve, reducing cultural differences to superficial stereotypes of food, fashion, and festivals. He provocatively refers to this effect as “Disneyfied” culture (83), a form of shallow entertainment analogous to a Walt Disney theme park. As Bissoondath argues, such practices promote the exoticism of minority groups and contribute to their permanent marginalization from positions of real power in society. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of Bissoondath’s critique is not just what he says, but who he is—an immigrant and a person of colour. Whether or not we agree with Bissoondath’s evaluation, he reminds us that good intentions are not enough. As educators, we need to look critically at the ways we recognize

and respect differences. In short, the simplification of culture is something we should guard against.

The second blind spot I raise comes up frequently in my role as a teacher educator in TESL certificate programs and refers specifically to a tendency for many of us to use culture as an explanatory crutch for student behaviours that we do not understand. For example, students who are falling behind, who seem unresponsive or inattentive are sometimes viewed as lacking the right forms of motivation. We are likely to label such “problems” as *culture shock* (Brown 35-40), a diagnosis in which the student is viewed as the carrier of mysterious traits inimical to “progress.” We are less likely, however, to view students’ silence or unresponsiveness as an effect of locally inappropriate teaching practices.

Part of the problem begins in language teacher education programs, many of which encourage teachers to adopt a single methodological framework. Problems that occur outside this framework can be perceived as cultural rather than pedagogical. And by labeling the problem, culture shock, we distract teachers from creative solutions they might discover. Moreover, we distract them from thinking about their teaching in terms other than methods—what Kumaravadivelu describes as *post-method* pedagogies.

The final blind spot I wish to mention may, in some ways, be more specific to the Toronto context. Living in Toronto—living with the constant manifestation of diversity—teachers can become so immersed in multicultural concerns that little else is perceived. Students, in a sense, become instances of cultural facts, or tokens of cultural types that we have studied in ELT publications. The individual student, as a result, can become invisible to us, and we no longer see or appreciate his or her personal uniqueness. Indeed, as researchers such as Kubota and Harklau have observed, this essentializing tendency can become a serious problem, in that some teachers even begin to negatively assess students who do not conform to the cultural stereotypes their teachers have imposed.

In spite of these “blind spots,” let me reiterate that cultural knowledge is important, but that we need to be careful. Following Foucault, I believe that all knowledge is potentially dangerous. The labels and categories we attach to students can have lifelong effects. So, my use of identity emphasizes the need for caution and the

need to pose critical questions around our teaching. The kinds of questions to ask, I believe, are not just “what is culture” but also “what does it do?” What forms of understanding does it enable? And what does it diminish or hide? More specifically for teachers, the question might be: whose culture are we observing, theirs or ours? What underlying purposes does cultural knowledge serve? To maintain our authority as experts? Or, to understand our students in all their human complexity?

I recognize that these types of questions may seem removed from the topic of L2 pronunciation, but I want to suggest that such a perception reflects, in part, a longstanding tradition in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research—in short, a strong preference for psycholinguistic explanations rather than ethnographic or ideological ones in framing our understanding of language learning. Such biases encourage us, as teachers, to think of language learning—specifically, the demonstration of native-like language forms—as an *end-in-itself*, rather than a *means* of self-discovery and in service of broader social goals. The assumptions that we hold regarding notions of culture, identity and language invariably shape the parameters we assign to a pronunciation activity and how we respond to the meanings students explore through their participation (Morgan, *The ESL Classroom* Ch.4). The following sections take up such concerns.

Expressing ‘who we are’ and ‘who we want to be’

Language, to a large degree, and pronunciation, to a smaller degree, expresses both *who we are* and *who we want to be* in many ways. We often infer emotions and personality traits such as happiness and sadness, confidence or apprehension through elements of pronunciation such as pitch, tempo, and loudness (Chaika). Cultural conventions regarding masculinity and femininity are similarly expressed and supported through stylistic elements of pronunciation. As well, cultural notions of leadership, authority and trust correspond to specific pronunciation norms. It is not uncommon for politicians in North America to hire speech consultants whose main purpose is to modify a candidate’s pronunciation in ways that conform to the expectations of their electorate.

The connection between language and identity has been an important focus of *variationist* and *interactional sociolinguistics* (Chambers; Gumperz) for many years, and a number of studies in this area have examined how identity differences are displayed and reinforced through pronunciation. In earlier studies on gender

and language, researchers such as Tannen and Lakoff contrasted the tentative nature of women's language at work with the authoritative stylistics of men's language in the same setting. A "tentative" person would be more likely to use rising tones as a means of softening assertions and of seeking confirmation from others. In contrast, a "confident" person might use more volume, stronger stress, and sharp, falling intonation patterns. According to Tannen, the underlying reason for such differences is that women have been socialized towards more supportive roles—towards building rapport in their conversational styles. In contrast, men are more likely to assume dominant roles, interrupting more often, and steering conversations towards topics they are familiar with in order to demonstrate their knowledge.

Another early example of work on identity and pronunciation can be seen in a popular educational video called *Crosstalk* (Twitchin), which features the work of John Gumperz, a pioneering ethnographer of cross-cultural communication. In one memorable scene, an East Indian immigrant in England goes into a bank and tries to deposit some money. As the scene unfolds, bad feelings soon develop resulting from the teller's perception of the depositor being overly pushy and rude. The sources of miscommunication, it turns out, are the patterns of sentence stress and intonation used by the depositor, someone who has lived in England for over twenty years, and whose post-secondary education in India was in English. In one national setting, India, these same pronunciation features would be viewed as conforming to "standards" of Indian English. In a British bank, however, these same elements suggest a "non-standard" or marked situation, one in which an individual customer is wrongly perceived as being agitated or rude towards the bank's employee.

Other studies established strong correlations between social class and pronunciation. Labov, for example, provides data that shows a consistent pattern in which the voiceless, interdental 'th' in *thick* and *thin* is usually produced as a fricative (e.g. /_IK/) by upper and middle class speakers and more commonly produced as a stop (e.g. /TIK/) by lower class speakers. Labov also examined correlations between race and language, particularly the defining linguistic features of African American vernaculars. More recently, educators and linguists have outlined the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical features that are indicative of Black English (BE) or Ebonics. Some defining features of BE pronunciation, according to

Smitherman (31), are postvocalic /r/ deletion (e.g. *Sista, Brotha*), greater sentence stress on *been*, and a tendency towards greater syllable-timed rhythm patterning as opposed to stress-timed rhythm, which is characteristic of dominant varieties of English (Avery & Ehrlich; Jenkins).

Looking at these types of studies, by Gumperz, Tannen, Labov, Smitherman, and others, it is important to remember that their intention was not to stigmatize the speakers of non-dominant varieties of English. In fact, the intent was quite the opposite. These sociolinguists set out to demonstrate that the academic underachievement of minority students was not the product of culturally and intellectually deprived home or community environments. Non-dominant varieties of language, as their research confirmed, are products of socialization and are as consistent as those spoken by society's dominant groups. Fairness requires those in power to respect and support these differences (Corson Ch.3).

Nonetheless, such studies had limitations. In order to show general patterns and rules of non-dominant speech, researchers needed to demonstrate these rules in a systematic way based on scientific methods. Otherwise, it would be too easy for people in power to ignore these findings. But because of these systematic, rule-generating methods, these studies tended to overlook group differences, individuality and creativity. Similarly, such studies reinforced a perception that identity was permanent—something *in* us, rather than something *between* us, changing over time and place and through interaction with others.

This latter, more fluid perspective is exemplified in the work of Bonny Norton and her depiction of identity as “multiple and contradictory” and “a site of struggle” (127). Norton is one of a growing list of ELT researchers who use critical, feminist, and poststructural theories as means of reconceptualizing identity and culture (Ibrahim; Kubota; Morgan, *Poststructuralism and Applied Linguistics*; Pavlenko; Pennycook). In their work, terms such as *discourse* and *subjectivity* are used to indicate that the thoughts and meanings we have are not entirely our own, but are shaped through our participation in various social practices. At the same time, these researchers articulate a notion of *agency* (Norton and Toohey); that is, the ability of individuals to take an active role in creating the meanings that define their group identities. In cities such as Paris, London, or Toronto, people are exposed to an incredible range of lifestyles and values. And often, they choose

to resist or change the roles assigned to them by tradition.

Similarly, language has been reconceptualized in ways that closely parallel the dynamics of identity. Critical theorists often focus on how language is employed to *position* people by defining what is “normal” or possible for individuals, communities, and nations. Critical theorists also talk about language as being fundamentally unstable and of meanings being indeterminate, multiple and a site of struggle between competing social groups (Morgan, *Poststructuralism and Applied Linguistics*; Norton; Pennycook). Think of words such as freedom, democracy, citizenship, globalization, free trade, human rights, or terrorism, as examples.

Recently, in Canada the term “racial profiling” has become highly contested as Canadian citizens originally from selected Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sudan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) have experienced increased scrutiny at American border crossings (Khan). Those opposed to this development describe it as a form of racism that discriminates against Canadians whose personal histories have already been thoroughly checked in order to gain citizenship. American officials reject the term “racial profiling”. Instead, they insist on the term “security” and say they only target Canadians born in countries that have links to terrorism.

This dispute over language—do we use “racial profiling” or “security” to name this practice—is only one example of how language becomes a site of struggle in public life. Some people and some groups go to great lengths to argue over when and where language can be applied, not because they are in the dictionary business, but because of the power of language to diminish our social expectations, or to mobilize us into some kind of action.

Guidelines for integrating personal identity issues

A pertinent question to ask is “What does this all mean for L2 pronunciation pedagogy?” What do we do with these critical theories about changing identities, multiple meanings, and power relations? Current researchers in this area want to emphasize that the issue of identity is always a part of language learning. Classroom activities around grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation are always *person-formative*, implicated in the formation of students’ experiences and expectations. Individual and collective identity negotiation is an active dimension

of our language lessons whether we are conscious of it or not (Cummins). The key issue becomes, then, finding ways of *consciously* integrating identity issues into our L2 pronunciation lessons? Towards this goal, the following section takes up four relevant guidelines.

Intelligibility

As pronunciation teachers, we usually ask the following questions: What should we teach, and what minimum goals should we expect in order to help our students be understood or intelligible? In the context of identity, there is a crucial point to be made: intelligibility is not only in the voice of the speaker, but also in the ears of the listener—his or her willingness to accept the speaker as worthy of speech (Norton). The status of the L2 speaker, in terms of race, class or gender—or whether he or she is an immigrant or refugee—can influence how or if the listener responds. I often remind students that “miscommunication” may not be entirely their fault, or a result of their L2 pronunciation. In fact, it may be an excuse to end a conversation or to discriminate against someone.

Another related point to consider is intelligibility for whom and between whom? In many EFL settings, indigenized varieties of English are commonly spoken. And in ESL settings such as Toronto, a lot of English is spoken *between* so-called Non-Native Speakers (Canagarajah)—even people who share the same L1 but prefer to practice or demonstrate their knowledge. In short, there are a lot of varieties of English spoken in the world, even in ESL settings, so there is no simple “one size fits all” approach to pronunciation pedagogy. When we look at the issue of intelligibility, we need to think about the specific language needs and social goals of our students.

Regarding pronunciation goals, Jennifer Jenkins’ work has been insightful for teaching English as an International Language (EIL). Still, I find many of her ideas also relevant for Toronto, especially around issues of identity. Jenkins proposes a more flexible set of foci and expectations in which teachers distinguish between core sounds—which should approximate native speaker norms as much as possible (121-123)—and non-core elements, or what she describes as *areas open to variation* (123-124). “Open to variation” does not remove these items from a pronunciation syllabus. It does suggest, however, variability based on local norms and student needs—focusing on the reception (i.e., listening) rather than production

(i.e., speaking) of a particular non-core item, for example.

Some of the core criteria Jenkins identifies are long/short vowel contrasts, voiced and unvoiced consonant distinctions, consonant clusters, sentence level stress, and focused or contrastive sentence stress. For areas of acceptable variation, she mentions 'th' forms, word stress, linking, and reduction on function words in sentences (e.g. prepositions, articles, conjunctions, the verb to BE, auxiliary forms).

Jenkins' reasons for choosing her specific core and non-core items are more detailed than I can cover here, but the general principle itself is one that I want to reiterate in relation to language and identity. Notions of intelligibility and the selection of core items should take into account the identities and communicative needs of our students. Such needs may change across programmes and classes, but they may also vary as a reflection of national or regional ideologies—the degree to which a national identity is correlated with a particular standardized form and whether or not speakers of non-dominant or L2 varieties are accepted by speakers of prestige varieties.

Negotiability of Meaning

The negotiability of meaning reflects theories that foreground the instability of language, the importance of meaning in context, and the role language plays in shaping our identities. In any pronunciation activity that integrates form and meaning, we should not be too quick in judging what students say or mean based on our prior expectations. In fact, by waiting, by listening a little longer, I have often found that students' ideas challenge many things I take for granted in Canadian society. Moreover, challenging ideas about identity and community need time to develop, and they also need to be circulated and revised in relatively safe places such as classrooms. Teachers can select materials that encourage negotiation, and they can help create environments where people are willing to explore new ideas, to which they themselves should also be open (Morgan, *The ESL Classroom*).

Balancing a Focus on Form/ Focus on Meaning

In general, I tend to organize my teaching around short units with individual lessons or sections that shift focus in terms of skills, integrated language items, context, and meaningful content. For example, I might have a small section that isolates a specific aspect of pronunciation: a minimal pair, word stress, or link-

ing item. Another section might integrate this element along with vocabulary or grammar work whereas another section may be focused primarily on meaning related to something discussed in class or a current event. This order could be reversed, beginning with a “top down” approach (i.e. a focus on meaning) rather than one that is “bottom up” (i.e. a focus on an isolated or discrete element of form) (Burgess and Spencer).

Meaningful Content/ Contexts (Identity Changing across Time and Place)

This point is inspired by dynamic notions of identity mentioned above. When selecting topics or materials for pronunciation activities, I usually think about the following types of questions: What is happening in students’ lives? How do recent events covered in the media affect them? In which ways does pronunciation relate to describing or talking about these events? Are there existing materials that I can use or adapt for class? Ideally, topics and contexts developed in class should be intrinsically motivating—issues that students might talk about in their L1.

Moreover, meaningful content does not only affirm what students already know. It can also open up opportunities to explore or criticise assumptions which are taken for granted, albeit, in a respectful way. In the context of EFL, the provision of meaningful content might also include class activities that look critically at the global spread of English, its role in class formation—the economic privileges it affords a few—and its effects on indigenous languages and cultures.

From the Classroom: Integrating Identity and Pronunciation

The following lesson, which illustrates the four guidelines above, took place in an intermediate level class at a Chinese community center in Toronto. All of the students were Chinese, mostly Cantonese speakers, but also some Mandarin speakers. Of the fifteen students in attendance, most were seniors and a majority were women.

In this program, I used Beisbeir’s book, *Sounds Great*, on a regular basis. In the following activity, identity issues (i.e. negotiability) emerge naturally from the structure and sequencing of the book. The form focus of the activity is a feature of connected speech, linking final consonants of words to initial vowels (C+V). In this specific activity, Beisbeir builds upon earlier lessons focused on rhythm groups and word stress (45-47).

For speaking practice of C+V linking, Beisbeir first focuses on individual final consonants and places them in rhythm groups: e.g. /p/ Stop over at 8/ and drop off my books. /t/ She's not at all tired/ but it's still early. /k/ When you back up,/ look out for other cars. Listening activities focus on discrimination of linked elements (e.g. 1a. She had a cold. 1b. She has a cold.) (56-57).

The next activity shifts to a focus on meaning, identifying and connecting proverbs (see below), while retaining elements of production by asking students to read them out loud. In terms of meaning negotiability, one of the most interesting aspects of the lesson occurs when students interpret the various proverbs and relate them to proverbs in their first language and culture.

Here are the proverbs as presented by Beisbeir (58):

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|--|---|
| 1. Out <u>o</u> f Sight/ | a. flock together. |
| 2. Where there's <u>a</u> will/ | b. the mice will play. |
| 3. Don't put <u>a</u> ll your eggs/ | c. and <u>e</u> verything in <u>i</u> ts place. |
| 4. You can lead <u>a</u> horse to water/ | d. out <u>o</u> f mind. |
| 5. Birds <u>o</u> f a feather/ | e. and silence <u>i</u> s golden. |
| 6. Home <u>i</u> s/ | f. wasn't built <u>i</u> n a day. |
| 7. When the cat's <u>a</u> way/ | g. there's <u>a</u> way. |
| 8. A place for <u>e</u> verything/ | h. in one basket. |
| 9. Speech <u>i</u> s silver/ | i. where the heart <u>i</u> s |
| 10. Rome | j. but you can't make <u>i</u> t drink. |

The students produced the following examples and interpretations:

- #1: "Travel is better than reading." "Ten years of walking better than ten years of studying."
- #3: "Don't put your money in one bank." "Don't buy just one stock." "Don't marry the first person you date."
- #5: *ou iy lai jiu* (fourth, third, fourth, fourth tones, in Mandarin Chinese) class translation: "Same material comes together."
- #7: "No boss, no work." "When the water king is gone, the ghosts take his place."
- #10: "Step by step." "Be patient." "Everything has its beginning."

It was interesting to see the whole class interpret “Out of sight, out of mind” as relating to practical experience instead of its conventional romantic associations in the North America context. We spent a few moments talking about related English proverbs on practical knowledge (e.g. Judge a person by what s/he does and not what s/he says).

“When the water king is gone...” was my personal favourite, in part for its comparatively exotic qualities. Of course, “Don’t marry the first person you date” had the entire class roaring with laughter and approval.

The most interesting response occurred around #8. One of my students interpreted “A place for everything...” in the following way: “A husband and wife should be in their place.” This statement surprised everyone, and another student asked her, “Do you mean a wife must obey her husband?” The first student then replied, “No. If a husband has a lover, or the wife the same, they are not in their place.” This was a thought-provoking idea in that “to be in one’s place,” or “to be kept in one’s place” by tradition usually connotes meanings of subordination or patriarchal authority when it is spoken by or about women. Indeed, the second student assumed this meaning and intended to provoke a debate by posing her question. But in fact the first student was invoking tradition—to be in one’s “proper” familial, marital place—as a means of asserting or claiming *equality* (“What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,” proverbially speaking).

The remainder of the class that day was an open discussion initiated by this exchange. What made an impromptu discussion of “one’s place” so vital for those in class are the many challenges to traditional identity and family roles that these students are experiencing in Toronto. Questions about one’s place, the continued relevance of one’s traditions, and the possibility—or desirability—of adopting the dominant values of one’s new home are central to identity negotiation. To reiterate, one key element in this specific example was meaning negotiability: allowing students the time to discuss their ideas without the hyper-correction of a teacher who might be eager to keep the class “focused” or “on task.”

Conclusions

When students participate in a language lesson or perform a language task, they are not only exchanging information or learning discrete skills. A parallel process

takes place, one in which students “are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Norton 11). As language educators, we tend to ignore this co-development. We routinely ask students to share their experiences, or to produce texts based on the same, but we rarely consider how we *return* these same experiences back to them. That is, we rarely examine how L2 methods, materials and interactions shape the way students’ experiences are understood or retained over time.

In the integrated approach I have discussed, we still need to know about articulation, minimal pair contrasts, connected speech, word and sentence stress, and L1 interference. But we should also be alert to a wider set of possibilities: For example, what identity options does a lesson suggest? What new pathways can a pronunciation lesson follow based on the personal and cultural values expressed or discovered in class. Whether we choose to use the term culture or identity, it is important to conduct our professional lives with the knowledge that our work is always implicated in a much broader field of social and ideological meanings.

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